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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CASABLANCA 001310

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SUBJECT: DESPITE LACK OF OFFICIAL ACCORD UNHCR EXPANDS RABAT OFFICE

REF: A) Casablanca 0818

B) Casablanca 0634

Classified By: Principal Officer Douglas C. Greene for Reasons 1.4
(b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During a recent meeting at UNHCR's office in Rabat, Head of Office Johannes Van der Klaauw told Poloff that, although the GOM is dragging its feet on official recognition of the organization, he is pressing forward with plans to increase his staff and enlarge his office space. Though frustrated with the holdup, Van der Klaauw spoke positively about the cooperation he is receiving from some ministries in dealing with the recognized refugees and asylum seekers. He is eager to help the GOM train its security forces in the internationally accepted methods of dealing properly with refugees in Morocco, and confirmed that he is now collaborating with more local and international NGOs that offer various types of assistance programs. NGOs are now providing medical care, job training, and shelter to the most vulnerable refugees. End Summary.

The Recognition Runaround

¶2. (C) In mid-November, UNHCR Head of Office Johannes Van der Klaauw shared with Poloff his disappointment with the GOM's continued refusal to sign a letter of official recognition of UNHCR's mission in Morocco. After months of negotiations, the GOM had agreed to sign the accord on July 10, during a visit by the UN's High Commissioner for Refugees. One day prior to the meeting however, Van der Klaauw received an unacceptable counter proposal from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) limiting the mission's diplomatic status and restricting UNHCR officers' freedom of movement within the country.

¶3. (C) Van der Klaauw attributes the complications and delays to the Ministry of Interior's (MOI) security concerns. The MOI, he claims, is understandably anxious about border security matters but must work with the MFA to reconcile Morocco's international humanitarian responsibilities with domestic and border security procedures. In Van der Klaauw's words, "the MOI is not keen on seeing the office officially recognized for fear of an onslaught of sub-Saharan refugees and asylum seekers inundating the country." He added that the MFA has been supportive, if only unofficially, and is receptive to discussing issues regarding the refugees.

Expansion of the Office

¶4. (C) Fourteen months ago, when Van der Klaauw arrived in Morocco, the UNHCR office had only two officers to interview a backlog of 2500

cases in addition to the hundreds of cases that appeared each month. During those fourteen months, Van der Klaauw has managed to increase the team to five and significantly decrease the backlog while continuing to meet the needs of those refugees and asylum seekers who still arrive in Rabat every day. He is also searching for more office space for the new staff and a space where they can offer expanded services to the refugee community.

15. (SBU) Currently, the UNHCR interviews 80 new applicants a month, of whom approximately twenty percent are approved. Over and above new applicants, the office continues to whittle down the 2500 accumulated cases that have been waiting since the summer of 2005. UNHCR staff has managed to slog through 1700 of the old cases and hopes to have the remaining 800 done by March 2007. Of the total number of cases rejected by the office, 700 have filed for appeal. Van der Klaauw explained that 400 of these are still waiting for processing in Geneva, 300 have been processed, and only one of the UNHCR Rabat's decisions has been reversed.

16. (U) The total number of recognized refugees and asylum seekers in Morocco remains small. Van der Klaauw made it clear that approximately 200 cases had been recognized in the twenty years prior to 2005 and another 250 new cases have been approved since his arrival in September of the same year. Van der Klaauw claims that most of the long-term cases living in Morocco have integrated to some extent, marrying Moroccans and sending their children to Moroccan schools. Many of these refugees and asylum seekers work in the informal sector as skilled craftsman and are not interested in relocation.

Security is Always an Issue

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17. (C) Some months ago, Van der Klaauw offered MOI officials a UN-funded training program designed to teach Moroccan security forces the internationally accepted methods of handling potential and recognized refugees and asylum seekers. According to Van der Klaauw, UNHCR Headquarters in Geneva has approved funding for the training project. The MOI has yet to accept the offer. Van der Klaauw reports that there is an enormous need for training throughout Morocco in general, and in the region around Oujda, in particular.

18. (C) Oujda is a mid-sized city in the northeast corner of Morocco. The city, near the Algerian border, is a transit point for illegal intending immigrants as well as legitimate refugees and asylum seekers. Each month, UNHCR receives word that Moroccan security officials have grabbed numerous refugees from in and around Rabat and Casablanca and transported them to the region near Oujda in an attempt to hustle them out of the country. According to Van der Klaauw, the security forces treat the refugees poorly, destroy their documents, and give them no opportunity to contact UNHCR. One of the reasons cited by security officials for this problem has been the easily falsified documents issued to the refugees by UNHCR. Van der Klaauw confided that he often hears reports about trafficking rings on the Algerian side of the border selling cheap and easily accessible false documents, which has exacerbated the problem with Moroccan security forces.

19. (C) In an attempt to solve the problem, UNHCR will soon begin to issue new machine-readable identification cards to all recognized refugees and asylum seekers. According to Van der Klaauw, the new laser printed ID cards will be difficult to duplicate. He hopes that the new cards will mean fewer desperate calls from the border to assist refugees in trouble. Van der Klaauw is prepared, however, for an initial negative reaction to the cards from the GOM. He suspects that the durable plastic cards may be seen as an indicator of a lengthy stay for the refugees and a permanent presence for UNHCR. Both situations run contrary to the apparent wishes of the GOM who would like to see all the refugees resettled in a third country.

Ministerial Cooperation

¶10. (C) While Van der Klaauw admitted to challenges in dealing with the MOI, he noted that other ministries have been very helpful in his endeavors to set up programs to assist the refugees. At the beginning of the school year, UNHCR worked closely with the Ministry of Education to register 40 refugee children in the Rabat-Sale public education system for the first time in the country. UNHCR is paying for supplies and other necessities for the children, most of whom are under twelve. In addition, the Ministry of Health (MOH) is cooperating with UNHCR and a Pan-African Medical NGO to assure that the recognized refugees receive proper medical treatment in hospitals and clinics in Rabat and Casablanca. UNHCR, in cooperation with the same NGO and the MOH, is funding a mobile clinic for mother and child care.

UNHCR Gets Help from Other NGOs

¶11. (SBU) Turning to the need for long-term living solutions for the refugees and asylum seekers, Van der Klaauw stated that his efforts to find local partners for adult education and training are finally paying off. A number of NGOs have agreed to allow some of the sub-Saharan refugees to enroll in their vocational training and adult education programs. The NGOs are also assisting with job placement and helping the refugees set up small income generating enterprises.

¶12. (SBU) Van der Klaauw, however, faces obstacles on all sides in these endeavors. He sent a letter to the MFA informing them officially about the new partnerships with the NGOs, as required. When he did not receive a reply, Van der Klaauw took it as an indication to proceed with his plans, which he has done. From the other side, according to UNHCR's NGO liaison officer, many of the refugees are reluctant to participate in the training programs. They are concerned that finding a position in Morocco or creating a subsistence level enterprise will harm their chances at resettlement.

Van der Klaauw says that nearly all the refugees claim it is impossible for them to integrate into Moroccan society and therefore need to be resettled in a third country. (Note: During the meeting, Van der Klaauw informed Poloff that he sent 13 resettlement case files for processing to the DOS regional refugee coordinator in Cairo. End Note)

Concerns for the Future

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¶13. (C) Van der Klaauw still expects the GOM to sign an agreement granting UNHCR official status, yet the frequent delays he encounters remain a cause for concern. He and his staff are still not able to travel in the country to check on or assist refugees and asylum seekers. He is troubled, also, that Moroccan security forces are still not respecting international agreements that protect the rights of recognized refugees and there is no pressure to do so without official recognition of the mission. Van der Klaauw says he is now getting more help from EU countries, which are reminding the GOM of its international responsibilities regarding UN conventions on the treatment of refugees. There is also more pressure from the EU regarding official recognition of the mission.

Comment

¶14. (C) Just over one year ago Morocco faced harsh international criticism and difficult domestic challenges when migration problems came to a head. Sixteen sub-Saharan intending immigrants died near the Spanish enclaves of Sebta and Melilla in northern Morocco while trying to rush the border. Subsequently, security forces were accused of rounding up thousands more from forests surrounding the enclaves and dumping them in the desert bordering Algeria and the Western Sahara. Morocco responded by actively seeking ways to deal with its migrant problem. The country issued appeals to the international community for financial assistance and organized a

groundbreaking Africa-European Migration conference in July. However, Morocco fears that establishing a UNCHR mission in Rabat may make the country a magnet for sub-Saharanans in search of a better life. An acceptable solution to at least one aspect of the migration problem, however, will continue to elude Morocco until it fulfills its international obligation to uphold the 1967 Protocol to protect refugees and asylum seekers and officially recognizes UNHCR's mission in Rabat.

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